

# **W. W. Corcoran Papers**

## **A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress**



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**Manuscript Division, Library of Congress  
Washington, D.C.  
2011**

Contact information:

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<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms011095>

LC Online Catalog record:

<http://lcn.loc.gov/mm77016899>

Prepared by David Humphrey

## Collection Summary

**Title:** W. W. Corcoran Papers

**Span Dates:** 1791-1896

**Bulk Dates:** (bulk 1849-1888)

**ID No.:** MSS16899

**Creator:** Corcoran, W. W. (William Wilson), 1798-1888

**Extent:** 54,000 items ; 105 containers ; 33 linear feet ; 5 microfilm reels

**Language:** Collection material in English

**Location:** Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**Summary:** Financier and philanthropist. Correspondence, letterpress books, financial papers, newspaper clippings, printed matter, and other papers relating primarily to Corcoran's business and banking interests and philanthropic efforts.

## Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

### People

Aiken, William, 1806-1887--Correspondence.  
Bancroft, George, 1800-1891--Correspondence.  
Belmont, August, 1816-1890--Correspondence.  
Breckinridge, John C. (John Cabell), 1821-1875--Correspondence.  
Brice, Arthur--Correspondence.  
Bright, Jesse D. (Jesse David), 1812-1875--Correspondence.  
Buchanan, James, 1791-1868--Correspondence.  
Clemson, Thomas Green, 1807-1888--Correspondence.  
Combs, Leslie, 1793-1881--Correspondence.  
Corcoran family--Correspondence.  
Corcoran family.  
Corcoran, Thomas, 1754-1830. Thomas Corcoran correspondence and financial records.  
Corcoran, W. W. (William Wilson), 1798-1888.  
Davis, Jefferson, 1808-1889--Correspondence.  
Davis, John Wesley, 1799-1859--Correspondence.  
Dickinson, Daniel S. (Daniel Stevens), 1800-1866--Correspondence.  
Douglas, Stephen A. (Stephen Arnold), 1813-1861--Correspondence.  
Doyle, Alexander, 1857-1922--Correspondence.  
Everett, Edward, 1794-1865--Correspondence.  
Ezekiel, Moses Jacob, 1844-1917--Correspondence.  
Fillmore, Millard, 1800-1874--Correspondence.  
Forney, John W. (John Wien), 1817-1881--Correspondence.  
Gallaudet, Edward Miner, 1837-1917--Correspondence.  
Gardner, John Lane, 1793-1869--Correspondence.  
Gerolt, Friedrich Karl Joseph von, approximately 1798-1879--Correspondence.  
Gillet, Ransom H. (Ransom Hooker), 1800-1876--Correspondence.  
Harrison, Gabriel, 1818-1902--Correspondence.  
Henry, Joseph, 1797-1878--Correspondence.  
Humboldt, Alexander von, 1769-1859--Correspondence.  
Hunter, R. M. T. (Robert Mercer Taliaferro), 1809-1887--Correspondence.  
Hyde, Anthony--Correspondence.  
Johnson, Robert Ward, 1814-1879--Correspondence.  
Jones, George Wallace, 1804-1896--Correspondence.  
Jones, J. William (John William), 1836-1909--Correspondence.  
Kendall, Amos, 1789-1869--Correspondence.

Lanman, Charles, 1819-1895--Correspondence.  
Lee, Robert E. (Robert Edward), 1807-1870--Correspondence.  
Mason, J. M. (James Murray), 1798-1871--Correspondence.  
Morgan, Junius Spencer, 1813-1890--Correspondence.  
Peabody, George, 1795-1869--Correspondence.  
Renwick, James, 1818-1895--Correspondence.  
Riggs, Elisha, 1826-1881--Correspondence.  
Riggs, Lawrason, 1814-1884--Correspondence.  
Rorer, David, 1806-1884--Correspondence.  
Slaughter, Philip, 1808-1890--Correspondence.  
Story, William Wetmore, 1819-1895--Correspondence.  
Vail, Aaron, 1796-1878--Correspondence.  
Venable, Charles S. (Charles Scott), 1827-1900--Correspondence.  
Walker, Robert J. (Robert John), 1801-1869--Correspondence.  
Webster, Daniel, 1782-1852--Correspondence.  
Wilson, James Grant, 1832-1914--Correspondence.  
Winthrop, Robert C. (Robert Charles), 1809-1894--Correspondence.

### **Organizations**

Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company.  
Bank of America.  
Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company.  
Corcoran & Riggs.  
Corcoran Gallery of Art.  
Little Miami Railroad Company.  
Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Rail Road Company.  
Riggs and Co.  
Wilson, Colston & Co.

### **Subjects**

Art museums--Washington (D.C.)  
Banks and banking--Maryland--Baltimore.  
Banks and banking--New York (State)--New York.  
Banks and banking--Washington (D.C.)  
Banks and banking.  
Business brokerage--Maryland--Baltimore.  
Business brokerage--New York (State)--New York.  
Business brokerage--Washington (D.C.)  
Business brokerage.  
Canals--Maryland.  
Canals--Washington (D.C.)  
Endowments.  
Finance--California.  
Finance--Iowa--Dubuque.  
Finance--Texas.  
Finance.  
Railroads--Delaware.  
Railroads--Finance--Wisconsin.  
Railroads--Finance.  
Railroads--Maryland.  
Railroads--Ohio.  
Railroads--Pennsylvania.  
Railroads--Virginia.  
Railroads--West Virginia.  
Railroads.

Real estate investment--Mississippi.  
Real estate investment.  
Speculation.

### **Places**

Washington (D.C.)--Social life and customs.

### **Occupations**

Financiers.  
Philanthropists.

## **Administrative Information**

### **Provenance**

The papers of W. W. Corcoran, financier and philanthropist, were given to the Library of Congress by William Corcoran Eustis in 1920. Additional material was given by Julius S. Cherry in 1973.

### **Processing History**

The papers of W. W. Corcoran were arranged and described in 1977. The finding aid was revised in 2009 and 2011.

### **Additional Guides**

An unpublished index and card indexes for certain files are available in the Manuscript Reading Room.

### **Transfers**

A miniature painting of Louise Amory Morris has been transferred to the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress where it is identified as part of these papers.

### **Copyright Status**

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of W. W. Corcoran is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

### **Access and Restrictions**

The papers of W. W. Corcoran are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

### **Microfilm**

A microfilm edition of a partial index of these papers is available on five reels. Consult reference staff in the Manuscript Division concerning availability for purchase subject to the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U. S. C.). The microfilm consists of a negative copy and is housed in the Photoduplication Service.

### **Preferred Citation**

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number or reel number, W. W. Corcoran Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

## **Biographical Note**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1798, Dec. 27	Born, Washington, D.C.; educated in private schools, with one year at Georgetown College
1817-1823	Operated W. W. Corcoran & Co., dry goods store and wholesale auction and commission business, Washington, D.C.

1828-1836	Real estate and suspended debts manager, Washington Branch of the Bank of the United States
1835	Married Louise Amory Morris
1837-1840	Operated brokerage business in Washington, D.C.
1840	Formed Corcoran & Riggs, a banking firm in Washington, D.C.
1847-1851	Major financier of Mexican War bonds
1854	Withdrew from Corcoran & Riggs to manage own properties and pursue philanthropic interests
1859	Began construction of Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
1862-1865	Lived in Europe
1869	Founded Louise Home, residence for elderly women, Washington, D.C.
1872	Corcoran Gallery of Art opened
1888, Feb. 24	Died, Washington, D.C.

## Scope and Content Note

The papers of William Wilson Corcoran (1798-1888) span the years 1791-1896, with the bulk dated between 1849 and Corcoran's death in 1888. While the collection consists mostly of correspondence, it also contains financial records, newspaper clippings, printed materials, admission and calling cards, military commissions, notebooks, lists, and memorabilia. The papers further include a small number of letters and financial records of Corcoran's father, Thomas, and are organized into the following series: [Family Correspondence](#), [Incoming Letters](#), [Outgoing Letters](#), [Special Correspondence](#), [Financial Records](#), and [Miscellany](#).

Corcoran's career was distinguished by several features: his success as a financier dealing primarily in government securities; the extent of the property holdings he accumulated; the prominence of his many political, business, and social connections, which included presidents of the United States, senators, generals, and several of the leading businessmen of his day; the diverse philanthropic activities that especially marked the thirty-four years following his withdrawal from the firm of Corcoran & Riggs; and his lengthy tenure as one of Washington's most prominent citizens.

The collection reflects Corcoran's career in several respects, none more so than his extensive connections with individuals in politics, business, and other fields. More than 125 correspondents in the collection are listed in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Especially important is the [Incoming Letters](#) series, which includes many personal letters, often candid and sometimes lengthy, from prominent friends. These associations are also reflected in the lists of Corcoran's "dinner company" which can be found in the [Miscellany](#) series.

The [Outgoing Letters](#) series, which forms the largest part of the collection, consists mostly of letterpress copies of Corcoran's business correspondence. Written by Corcoran, Anthony Hyde, Corcoran's secretary for many years, and Arthur Brice, who assisted Corcoran and Hyde during Corcoran's last years, the letters deal mainly with Corcoran's management of his real and personal property holdings during the last half of his life. These letters are for the most part brief and impersonal, the main exception being the long and newsworthy letters that Anthony Hyde wrote Corcoran while the latter was traveling. Interspersed among these outgoing letters are many financial accounts and statements of stock holdings, rents collected, and other business and financial matters.

Common topics in the outgoing business letters are the execution of land and security transactions, payment of land taxes and property insurance, and the collection of rents, interest, and dividends. Correspondents are frequently Corcoran's

agents-in-the-field or the banking and brokerage firms through which he operated, such as Riggs and Co. of New York, the Bank of America, and Wilson, Colston and Co. of Baltimore. Among the more frequently mentioned investment ventures are the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company; the Little Miami Railroad; the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Rail Road Company; the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company; California and Texas debts; the “Great Superior Scheme” in Wisconsin; Dubuque, Iowa, bonds; and Corcoran’s Mississippi land holdings. While [Outgoing Letters](#) reflect Corcoran’s business activities after 1845, letters and other records in the [Incoming Letters](#) and [Financial Records](#) series document his business and financial interests prior to that date.

Philanthropic and community activities, as reflected in [Outgoing Letters](#), begin to appear with increasing frequency in the 1870s and are concerned with business and administrative operations such as sending checks to asylums, building the Corcoran Art Gallery, and informing women of admission procedures for Louise Home. In both [Incoming Letters](#) and [Outgoing Letters](#) the great preponderance of the philanthropically related correspondence deals with individuals who, beginning in the 1850s, sought charitable loans and donations from Corcoran as well as help in procuring jobs with the federal government. Corcoran acceded to some of these requests, getting in return many thank-you letters, but the number of requests became overwhelming after the Civil War. Anthony Hyde answered hundreds of these letters in the negative, and eventually developed a printed form letter for the purpose.

Although Corcoran’s family life was marked by tragedy because of the early deaths of his wife and children, the [Family Correspondence](#) reflects mostly the happier moments. Especially prominent is Corcoran’s intimate correspondence with his wife during the five years between their courtship and her death.

Among the more notable figures whose correspondence appears in the collection with some frequency are statesmen and politicians William Aiken, John C. Breckinridge, Jesse D. Bright, James Buchanan, Leslie Combs, Jefferson Davis, John Wesley Davis, Daniel S. Dickinson, Stephen A. Douglas, Edward Everett, Millard Fillmore, Friedrich Karl Joseph von Gerolt, Ransom H. Gillet, R. M. T. Hunter, Robert Ward Johnson, George Wallace Jones, Amos Kendall, J. M. Mason, Aaron Vail, Robert J. Walker, Daniel Webster, and Robert C. Winthrop; businessmen and entrepreneurs August Belmont, Thomas Green Clemson, Junius Spencer Morgan, George Peabody, Elisha Riggs, Jr., and Lawrason Riggs; lawyer David Rorer; military officers John Lane Gardner and Robert E. Lee; authors and editors George Bancroft, John W. Forney, Gabriel Harrison, J. William Jones, Charles Lanman, the reverend Philip Slaughter, and James Grant Wilson; educators Edward Miner Gallaudet and Charles S. Venable; scientists Joseph Henry and Alexander von Humboldt; sculptors Alexander Doyle, Moses Jacob Ezekiel, and William Wetmore Story; and architect James Renwick, Jr.

## Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in six series:

- [Family Correspondence, 1829-1862](#)
- [Incoming Letters, 1791-1888](#)
- [Outgoing Letters, 1845-1888](#)
- [Special Correspondence, 1857-1859](#)
- [Financial Records, 1810-1896](#)
- [Miscellany, 1821-1891](#)

## Description of Series

### *Container*

### *Series*

BOX 1-2

#### **Family Correspondence, 1829-1862**

Letters sent and received by Corcoran, his wife and daughter, and other family members.  
Arranged alphabetically by name of family member and thereunder chronologically.

BOX 3-28

#### **Incoming Letters, 1791-1888**

Letters, notes of indebtedness, commissions, and bills. The card catalogue in the Manuscript Reading Room has an index of correspondents; however, it is incomplete, especially for letters in the first four volumes of this series. The originals of letters written to Corcoran by his secretaries, copies of which appear in the Outgoing Letters series, are included in this series only for 1862-1865.  
Arranged chronologically.

BOX 29-100

#### **Outgoing Letters, 1845-1888**

Press copies of outgoing letters and financial accounts. The first sixty-four volumes are bound and cover the years 1845-1888, except for letters dated June 2, 1849–Mar. 9, 1851, the letterpress copybook for which is not in the collection. Each of the sixty-four volumes has an index of correspondents and subjects. In 1865, Corcoran's secretary began placing copies of most of his letters to Corcoran, written while Corcoran was traveling, in separate letterpress copybooks, that date to 1887 and comprise volumes 93-99. Each has a table of contents that summarizes the subjects covered in each letter. Volume 100 contains press copies of private letters sent by W. W. Corcoran, 1866-1871. The volume is bound and has an index of correspondents.  
Arranged chronologically.

BOX 101

#### **Special Correspondence, 1857-1859**

Press copies of letters sent by S. L. Sommers, one of Corcoran's agents-in-the-field. The volume has an index of correspondents.  
Arranged chronologically.

BOX 102-104

#### **Financial Records, 1810-1896**

Correspondence, bills and receipts, accounts, notes, checks, stock certificates, indentures, proceedings, and auditor's reports.  
Arranged by name of family member and thereunder by type of material.

BOX 105

#### **Miscellany, 1821-1891**

Newspaper clippings, lists, invitations, admission and calling cards, catalogue of Corcoran's library, recipes, booklet of poems, and printed matter.  
Arranged alphabetically by type of material.

# Container List

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
<b>BOX 1-2</b>	<b>Family Correspondence, 1829-1862</b> Letters sent and received by Corcoran, his wife and daughter, and other family members. Arranged alphabetically by name of family member and thereunder chronologically.
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<b>BOX 2</b>	1838, Aug.-1862, undated (2 folders)
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<b>BOX 2</b>	Miscellaneous
<b>BOX 3-28</b>	<b>Incoming Letters, 1791-1888</b> Letters, notes of indebtedness, commissions, and bills. The card catalogue in the Manuscript Reading Room has an index of correspondents; however, it is incomplete, especially for letters in the first four volumes of this series. The originals of letters written to Corcoran by his secretaries, copies of which appear in the Outgoing Letters series, are included in this series only for 1862-1865. Arranged chronologically.
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<b>BOX 5</b>	1830, Sept. 14-1835, June 17
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## Incoming Letters, 1791-1888

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**BOX 29-100**

### **Outgoing Letters, 1845-1888**

Press copies of outgoing letters and financial accounts. The first sixty-four volumes are bound and cover the years 1845-1888, except for letters dated June 2, 1849–Mar. 9, 1851, the letterpress copybook for which is not in the collection. Each of the sixty-four volumes has an index of correspondents and subjects. In 1865, Corcoran's secretary began placing copies of most of his letters to Corcoran, written while Corcoran was traveling, in separate letterpress copybooks, that date to 1887 and comprise volumes 93-99. Each has a table of contents that summarizes the subjects covered in each letter. Volume 100 contains press copies of private letters sent by W. W. Corcoran, 1866-1871. The volume is bound and has an index of correspondents.

Arranged chronologically.

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### BOX 101      **Special Correspondence, 1857-1859**

Press copies of letters sent by S. L. Sommers, one of Corcoran's agents-in-the-field. The volume has an index of correspondents.  
Arranged chronologically.

## Special Correspondence, 1857-1859

### *Container*

### *Contents*

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BOX 105	Lists of "dinner company," 1847-1850, 1857-1859, undated
BOX 105	List of paintings; list of candidates and votes, undated
BOX 105	Memorabilia, 1821, undated
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BOX 105	Family, philanthropic, and social matters, 1827-1828, 1885
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**Miscellany, 1821-1891**

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